

# Back to Bologna

The long road to European higher education reform

In 1088, masters of grammar, rhetoric and logic in the Italian city of Bologna founded what was to become the oldest university in the Western world. Soon, other cities established their own universities, such as Paris (France, 1150), Oxford (UK, 1201), Cambridge (UK, 1209), Heidelberg (Germany, 1386) and Leuven (Belgium, 1425). These events marked the beginning of an intellectual revolution that was to shape European society for the next millennium. As the universities became centres of knowledge in the medieval world, they pulled together diverse strands of science, philosophy and art from Europe, the Middle East and Asia. Students from across the continent travelled to them and, on returning to their home countries, distributed what they had learnt. By gathering, creating and spreading knowledge, the medieval universities not only laid the foundations for the later rise of European science, but also became shining beacons of education and research for almost a thousand years.

Over the past 50 years, however, US universities have taken the lead in educational standards and research, while most European universities became less competitive and less innovative. To address this decline and make European education the pinnacle of academic excellence again, European educators, ministers, students and policy-makers have taken the initiative to reform the university system by using the tools of the so-called Bologna Process. The overall aim is to establish a European higher education area (EHEA) by 2010, with a harmonized degree and course credit system that will allow students to move freely between European countries without having to translate their credits or qualifications; a single education currency. In particular, the efforts to introduce a three-cycle degree system—composed of bachelor, master and doctoral degrees—are already beginning to change the landscape of university education in Europe. Phillip Altbach, Director of the Center for International Higher Education at Boston College, MA, USA, commented that it is time for Europe

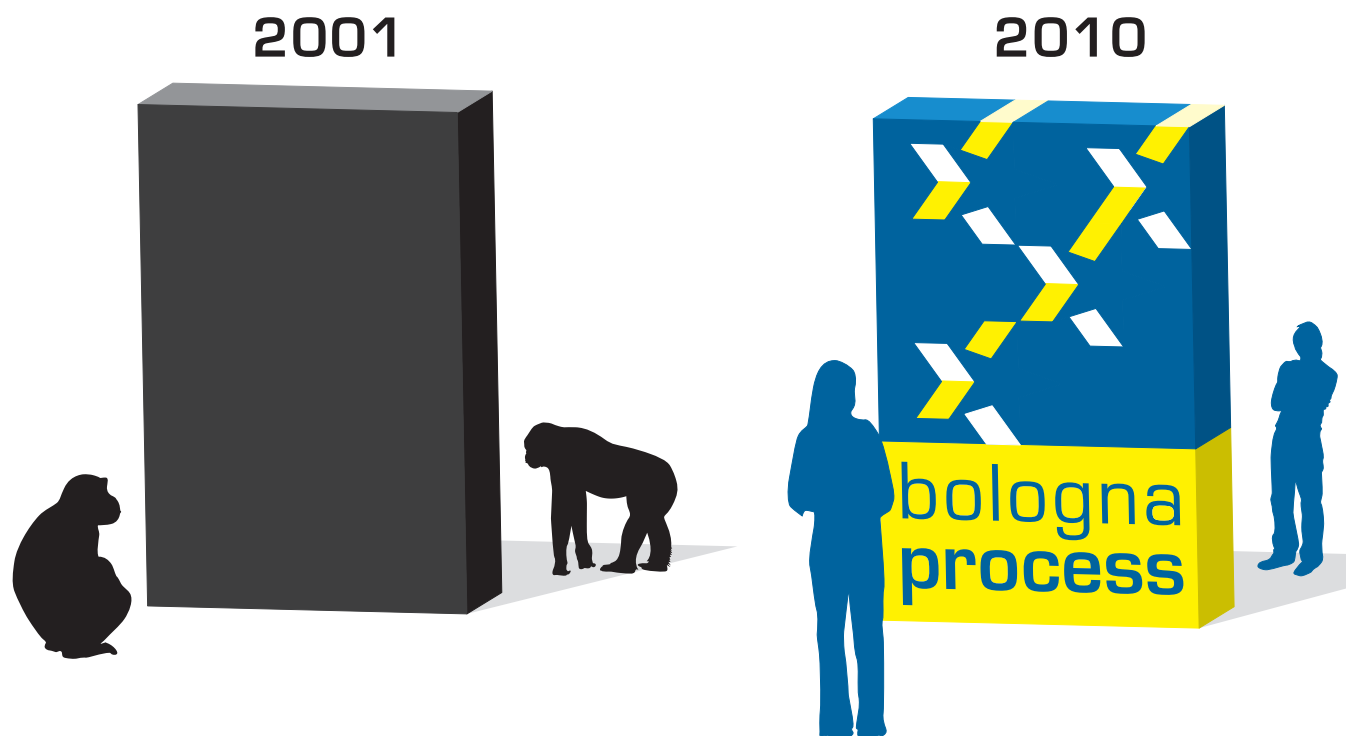
to “join the US at the top of the charts,” and that “[The Bologna Process] is very important and will make European universities more competitive internationally.”

The reform of the European system of higher education began as early as 1988, when university rectors met at the University of Bologna to celebrate its 900th anniversary. They issued the *Magna Charta Universitatum*, which lays down a series of principles to guide policy-makers and allow universities to remain centres of free thought and research, while better serving the cultural integrity and heritage of European societies (MCU, 1988).

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Ten years later, a meeting of the education ministers of Germany, France, Italy and the UK in Sorbonne, France, produced the joint Sorbonne Declaration, which committed the signatories to “encouraging a common frame of reference, aimed at improving external recognition and facilitating student mobility as well as employability” (Sorbonne, 1998). The Declaration continued that, “[w]e owe our students, and our society at large, a higher education system in which they are given the best opportunities to seek and find their own area of excellence” (Sorbonne, 1998).

The Bologna Process began in earnest in 1999 when the Ministers of Education from 29 European countries gathered in Bologna to discuss educational reform and how to meet the growing challenge of international education and employment markets. The resulting Bologna Declaration and various statements and agreements from follow-up conferences also established a range of measures and goals. Specifically, the Bologna Process would seek to apply the UK/US degree structure throughout



European universities, while maintaining the cultural and educational diversity of each country; agree on a universal system of credits so that students could take their academic achievements from one country to another; and ensure that the degrees offered by European universities address the needs of students as they enter the employment market (Bologna, 1999).

There are several levels of implementation: at the international level, the national level and, of course, at each university. In general, at the international level, Bologna has been a huge success with regular ministerial meetings and other seminars that have involved a range of stakeholders including the Council of Europe (CE; Brussels, Belgium), the European Commission (EC; Brussels, Belgium), the Bologna Follow-up group, the European Students Union (ESU; Brussels, Belgium) and the European University Association (EUA; Brussels, Belgium). So far, a total of 46 countries are signed up to introduce the Bologna reforms, including some in the European Cultural Convention such as the Russian Federation.

David Crosier, from the EUA, wrote after a meeting in London in 2007 that, “[i]t is

extraordinary that an agenda for higher education reform is even being discussed, let alone shared and agreed upon among as many as forty-six countries” (Crosier, 2007a). He puts the progress so far down to the astounding cooperation because “no-one—especially governments, institutions and students—is threatened by the process, and everyone sees that they have an interest which can be pursued through the process.” Similarly, Ján Figel’, the European Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture and Youth commented that, “Bologna [...] is successful because of the commitment which has been shown both by national and regional authorities, and by the stakeholders themselves.”

However, there are several issues that still need to be addressed. “I worry about implementation of reforms, about the lack of attention given to key issues in the change process, about the disparity between discourse on the importance of education compared to the investment being made into it,” Crosier said. Indeed, at the national level things are not running as smoothly. Some countries have made much progress in implementing the Bologna reforms by developing new curricula and assessment, and passing appropriate legislation

that echoes the goals of Bologna. Yet other countries have made reforms without any discussion, or have made little progress in implementing Bologna at all. Worse still, reforms have sometimes been made badly or with little thought, which has made the situation worse rather than better.

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“Combining structural changes with a real modernization of the content of learning remains the biggest challenge,” Figel’ commented. At the institutional level, most universities are indeed implementing the reforms agreed to in the Bologna Process, but they are often at the legislative mercy of their governments. “Nordic countries are extremely good role models for student participation, but the rest of Europe has a lot of catching up to do,” Crosier noted.

As a result, the quality and extent to which the reforms are being implemented

differ from country to country—and even institution to institution. Although some countries have created new courses and examinations fully in line with the vision of Bologna, others have simply split their long first degrees in half and renamed them bachelor and master, or made no changes at all except in name. “In some countries, the old 4- to 5-year’ course cycles have been squeezed into the new 3-year’ courses instead of shaping the first and second cycle in a more balanced way,” Figel’ agreed. “This might have a negative effect on short-term mobility schemes [...] there would simply be no room left for mobility in the new, denser programmes.”

Part of the problem is that some European countries, particularly those in southeast Europe and the old Eastern Bloc, do not yet have the experience, resources or national discussions to fully implement the Bologna reforms at this stage. Furthermore, Bologna is a voluntary reform—there are no international treaties or legally binding agreements—which means that there are no official incentives or punishments to encourage or force countries to implement Bologna properly. “[S]ome still mistakenly consider Bologna reforms to be no more than a minor structural adjustment to higher education systems [...] in reality the changes imply a major cultural shift in educational philosophy” (Crosier, 2007b).

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Yet, Crosier commented that, notwithstanding the difficulties in implementation, the process itself is well on its way. “I think [the benefits of a three-cycle system] are to do with flexibility of systems and greater opportunities for learning in a rapidly changing world,” he explained. “These will become clearer over time—but at the moment many are not seeing the benefits as a result of misconceptions and the way in which implementation is taking place and (not) being supported.” The EUA’s Trends V report notes that 82% of institutions claim to have the three-cycle system in place—compared with 53% in 2003—and points out that, “there is no longer any question of whether or not reform of degree structures

will take place, but rather a shift to considering whether the conditions and support are adequate to enable the process to be successful” (EUA, 2007).

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Figel’ also noted that Bologna has already gained a good international reputation: “countries, from North Africa to Central Asia, are showing a keen interest in Bologna-like reforms,” he said. “The United States is very interested in the Bologna Process and awareness about it is increasing steadily there.” Altbach disagrees slightly: “the American higher education world is almost entirely ignorant of Bologna and its possible implications,” he said. Among those who are aware of it, he noted that, “[t]here is in general admiration of what is going on and some apprehension that bringing down barriers within Europe may raise them around Europe making it more difficult or expensive for American students to study in Europe.”

The Trends V report suggests that the greatest barrier to the successful implementation of Bologna is the traditional model of universities as independent and loosely connected faculties (EUA, 2007). The EUA argues that universities must look at what the students need and aim to provide it, rather than faculties taking an individual approach to giving students ‘just science’ or ‘just history’. “This approach to curriculum—thinking about the outcomes required by students and society before looking at inputs from academic staff—is the most important pedagogical revolution taking place in our institutions,” Crosier wrote (Crosier, 2007b).

This is certainly a direction that the students of Europe must surely welcome. However, the ESU continues to be critical of the implementation of Bologna. In its 2007 report, *Bologna With Student Eyes*, it noted that “[t]here is a worrying ‘à la carte’ approach to implementing the Bologna Process in a significant amount of countries [...] The Bologna Process is not a pick-and-choose supermarket, but a comprehensive package. Each action line is in some way interlinked with and builds upon several others” (ESU, 2007).

In 2005, The National Unions of Students in Europe (ESIB, which became the ESU in 2007) published an even more critical report, *The Black Book of the Bologna Process*, in which it used several ‘bad examples’ to help others learn from these mistakes (ESIB, 2005). From the lack of discussion of quality assurance with students in Poland, to the difficulties of adapting the current Italian degree structure to a Bologna three-cycle model, the report was heavily critical of how almost every aspect of the Bologna Process is being implemented somewhere. The result, the ESIB concluded, is that current students are suffering in the transition.

Clearly, a reform as wide-ranging as Bologna attracts criticism, not only about how it is implemented, but also about possible long-term consequences. Some fear that the Bologna Process will impose the US/UK degree system at the loss of unique styles of education throughout Europe, whereas others argue that it only acts to turn education into a market that regards students as customers. Chris Lorenz, Professor of History at the University of Leiden and the Free University of Amsterdam (The Netherlands), described the reforms envisioned by Bologna as “policies [that] can be summarized under the labels of commodification of knowledge, the marketization of higher education, the enlargement of scale as the primary policy to cut down costs, and [...] the ‘managerial colonization’ of higher education and the simultaneous de-professionalization of the faculty in the name of a new ‘professionalism’” (Lorenz, 2006).

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His criticisms draw on the current emphasis on knowledge as the basis for advanced economies, which “represent[s] universities as enterprises and academics as entrepreneurs,” and that forces science “to justify itself in economical terms” (Lorenz, 2006). The ESIB also noted in its 2005 report that, “[a] strong focus on the competitiveness of Europe in the world is a two-edged sword. It can on the one hand lead to an increase in quality and transparency, on the other hand it can further the privatization agenda and brain drain” (ESIB, 2005).

Indeed, the stakeholders are becoming increasingly aware of this so-called 'social dimension', which includes considerations of how to ensure equal opportunities for higher education, academic mobility and "that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations" (Bologna, 2007). "I see a growing interest in the social dimension of higher education," and that developing "comparable and reliable indicators on the social dimension [...] will help us find creative solutions that combine efficiency and equity in higher education," Figel' commented.

In addition, the marketization of education is not necessarily a direct result of the Bologna Process—in fact, although the reforms aim to harmonize educational standards, they do not seek to enforce financial regulation of universities or tell them how to attract students. "I wouldn't agree with anyone who claims that the social and financial status of students has improved or worsened as a result of Bologna. In many countries it may have improved or worsened, but this is as a result of national higher education policy choices," Crosier said.

Others criticize the imposition of the three-cycle system. Yet, comparisons with the USA—in particular with the high tuition fees at its elite universities—are not valid. "A European way is both preferable and possible [but that] doesn't mean that the 'European way' should be developed without taking account of developments in other regions of the world," Crosier pointed out. "[There is] much debate [...] about how to develop greater diversity of provision that will be

more suitable to a growing diversity of learner needs. Standardization is the last thing that is needed in that context."

**"...the nature of higher education provision and learning is [...] going to change much more radically than many people are assuming"**

In fact, Bologna is not intended to be a European copy of the US model—and most experts agree that it would not work in Europe. "Europeans look to the top private universities in the US with envy," Altbach pointed out, but "such universities are impossible in the European context in my view." Crosier also does not believe that many European universities would model themselves on private US universities: "Bologna isn't just about moving continental Europe closer towards an imagined 'Anglo-Saxon model'" (Crosier, 2007b). This notwithstanding, universities such as Oxford and Cambridge in the UK have long sought to increase their income to compete with the educational resources of Harvard or Yale.

In any case, Crosier sees the future of university education as being very different from today's model. "[T]he world is changing fast, people are living and working longer, and the nature of higher education provision and learning is also going to change much more radically than many people are assuming. In the future, I expect, for example, that most people will leave higher education after a bachelor degree, work for a few years, do a master degree, work again,

do another qualification a few years later," he said. But for now, the patchwork nature of the implementation means that, as Crosier noted, some students "are suffering from being caught in the transition between different educational paradigms, and from poor implementation of good ideas."

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